

Wedding Planning: 30 Expert Tips and Tricks

Want to be certain all your wedding planning bases are covered? Read the tips that no bride should be without.

When planning your wedding, there are things that are nice to know, like that mermaid silhouettes are all the rage or that purple is making a comeback. Then, there are things you need to know -- advice so essential that any bride who's lucky enough to hear it thinks, "I'm so glad someone told me that!" If you're wondering whether there's something you may have missed (or even if you've got everything under control), check out our indispensable planning secrets.

1. Guests Come First

Get a grip on the approximate number of guests you'll invite before settling on a venue. This will ensure there's ample space for your crew. As a rule of thumb, allow for 25 to 30 square feet per guest. That may seem like a lot, but it's not if you count the space you'll need for the tables, bustling waiters, the band, and the dance floor.

2. Investigate Wedding Blackout Dates

Know ahead of time if your wedding date falls on the same day as a trade conference, charity walk, or other local event that could affect traffic and hotel room availability.

3. Listen to Mother Nature

Heed the weather and other potential annoyances. Guests have been known to skip out early from hotter-than-hot summer tent weddings and improperly heated winter loft receptions. Bugs (gnats, deerflies, and no-see-ums) also swarm in certain areas during certain seasons. Consider renting pest control tanks to alleviate the problem or including bug repellent in guests' gift bags. And if you want a sunset ceremony, make sure you know when to say your vows by checking SunriseSunset.com.

4. Check Your Credit

Take advantage of the high cost of weddings and sign up for a credit card with a rewards program. Whether it gives you airline miles or great shopping deals, consolidating all wedding-related purchases to this card will help you accumulate thousands of rewards points (which could be used for your honeymoon).

5. Pay It Forward

Let one vendor lead you to another. Your wedding photographer can tell you which florist's blooms really pop, and your reception manager should know which band packs the dance floor.

6. Lighten Your List

The easiest way to trim your wedding budget? Cut your guest list. Remember, half of your wedding expenses go to wining and dining your guests. If it's costing you \$100 per person, eliminating one table of 10 can save you \$1,000.

7. Ask and You Might Receive

Request an extra hour for cocktails or for your band to throw in that Frank Sinatra sound-alike before you sign on the dotted line. Most vendors would rather secure the reservation than nickel-and-dime you early on and turn you off. Later on, though, they may have less of a motive to meet you halfway.

8. Make a Meal Plan

Another unforeseen expense? Feeding your wedding day crew. Before you sign the contracts, make sure you're not required to serve the same meal to your vendors that guests will receive. Otherwise, you could be paying for 20 additional lobster tails. Choose a less expensive (but equally hearty) meal for them instead. You will have to let your wedding caterer know a couple of days before the wedding exactly how many vendors you need to feed (don't forget photography assistants and band roadies) and what you want them to serve.

9. Get Organizationally Focused

In a three-ring binder, compile all your correspondences with vendors, notes you make during meetings, and photos or tear sheets from magazines you want vendors to see. Set up a special email address dedicated to your wedding, and store important vendor numbers in your cell phone.

10. Tend to Your Bar

Typically, you need one bartender per 50 guests to keep the line at a minimum. But if you're serving a signature cocktail that cannot be made ahead of time (or in large quantities), consider adding an extra server designated to this task.

11. Leave Some Room in Your Wallet

Your wedding budget should follow this formula: 48 to 50 percent of total budget to reception; 8 to 10 percent for flowers; 8 to 10 percent for attire; 8 to 10 percent for entertainment/music; 10 to 12 percent for photo/video; 2 to 3 percent for invites; 2 to 3 percent for gifts; and 8 percent for miscellaneous items like a wedding coordinator. It's essential to allocate an extra 5 to 10 percent of your money for surprise expenses like printing extra invites because of mistakes, additional tailoring needs, and umbrellas for a rainy day, and ribbons for the wedding programs. Go to TheKnot.com/budgeter for an interactive budget allows you to add your own items.

12. Don't Be Afraid to Ask

Your wedding vendors should be your go-to, most-trusted experts during the planning process. When working with them, you should feel free to really explore what it is you want -- maybe it's serving a late-night snack instead of a first course or doing a bridal portrait session rather than an engagement session. The bottom line is that you should feel like you can have an honest conversation with them about what it is you want. Their job will be to tell you what you can and can't make work given your wedding budget.

13. Wait for a Date

Sometimes, last-minute planning can work in your favor. The closer your date, the more bargaining power you have. Since most people book their wedding sites at least six months in advance, calling for open dates two months prior to your desired time can save you up to 25 percent. And, Friday and Sunday weddings should cost about 30 percent less than Saturday weddings.

14. Manage the Mail

Of course you want the perfect stamps for your wedding invitations. But not all stamps are widely available at every post office, especially in large quantities. Save yourself scouting time by ordering them online at USPS.com. And be sure to weigh your invitation and all the additional paper products before you send them out so you can attach the right amount of postage. Ask your stationer about the need for additional postage for odd-shaped envelopes.

15. Prepare for Rejection

Know that as a rule, about 30 percent of the people you invite won't attend. Naturally, this depends on the location of your wedding (destination weddings are harder to attend), how many out-of-towners are on your list, and the timing of the event (some guests may have annual holiday or summer plans). On the other hand, everyone could accept -- knowing your wedding will be the can't-miss party of the year!

16. Make a Uniform Kids Policy

You have four choices: You can welcome children with open arms; you can decide to have an "adults only" wedding; you can include immediate family only; or, you can hire a child care service to provide day care either at the reception space, in a hotel room, or in a family member's home. To prevent hurt feelings, it's wise to avoid allowing some families to bring children while excluding others (unless, of course, the children are in your bridal party).

17. Prioritize Your People

Pare down your guest list with the "tiers of priority" trick. Place immediate family, the bridal party, and best friends on top of the list; follow with aunts, uncles, cousins, and close friends you couldn't imagine not being there. Under that, list your parents' friends, neighbors, coworkers, and so on. If you need to make some cuts, start from the bottom until you reach your ideal number.

18. Take It One Step at a Time

Put together a wedding planning schedule and do things one by one, in a logical order, so you don't take on too much too fast and end up with everything snowballing around you. Don't hire any vendors before you've confirmed your date; don't design your cake before you've envisioned your flowers; and don't book a band before you've settled on a space.

19. No Ring, No Bring

If your guest list is bursting at the seams, assess the plus-one scenario. Do a faux seating chart in your mind, and imagine whom your single pal would sit with. If it's a table of singles that she knows pretty well, then you're all set. If it's a table of couples (making her the odd one out) or if it's a table of singles where she won't know anyone, consider bending the rules. If asked why you're not allowing single friends to bring guests, size constraints or your parents' never-ending guest list are always good fallback white lies.

20. Release Rooms

As soon as you have picked a date, start to look for hotels in a wide variety of price points. Many hotels allow you to reserve rooms for guests under a special wedding block and a reduced rate. You can then release any unbooked rooms a month prior to your wedding. If the hotels you contact insist upon contracts with cancellation penalties, just say no -- you don't want to be responsible for rooms you can't fill.

21. Provide Accurate Driving Directions

Make sure guests know where they're going. As easy as online map programs are to use, sometimes the directions are wrong -- or there's a quicker, less traffic-prone route to take. Ask your ceremony and reception sites for printouts of recommended driving directions, which they often keep in stock for weddings and will give to you for free, and test out the routes yourself.

22. Keep a Paper Trail

Get any nonstandard changes to your agreements in writing or send the vendor a confirmation email saying, "Hello, just confirming that you'll keep the venue open until 2 a.m. versus midnight." Don't take anyone on his word -- by the time the big day rolls around, your contact may no longer be working there to vouch for you.

23. Schedule the Setup

You must make sure there's ample time for setup. If you're renting a venue and bringing in outside help, ask, "What time can people come in to set things up?" Preston Bailey, author of *Preston Bailey's Fantasy Weddings*, recommends seeing if they can do it the day before, or at the very least the entire wedding day, before the event starts.

24. Learn About Marriage Licenses

You can check your state's license requirements online, but confirm with a call to the county clerk's office to see when they're open. Even if it's open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., they may issue marriage licenses only during slower times like, say, Thursdays from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. Give a copy of your marriage license to your mom or your maid of honor (just in case you lose yours during the final days before your wedding).

25. Go Over Ground Rules

Be prepared! Ask the manager of the house of worship or site where you'll be married for the list of restrictions (if any). For instance, is flash photography or bare shoulders prohibited? Or, if you're exchanging vows outdoors, are you allowed to plant tent stakes in the lawn (which is often a no-no)?

26. Classify Your Cash

Wedding budgets are all about balance. Start your budget planning by making a list of the crucial details, like the music, your wedding gown, the invitations, the flowers, and the photographer, and assign a number to each -- one being the most important and three being the least. Invest your money in all your number ones and cut corners on your number threes. (But everything can't fall into the number one category!) For example, if a designer gown and fabulous food are what really matter, you may have to choose simple invitations and smaller floral arrangements.

27. Help Guests Pay Attention

Make sure your guests can see -- and hear. If people are seated farther than 15 rows back from your ceremony altar or podium, consider renting a mic and a riser. This could range anywhere from \$50 to \$100, depending on the equipment used. You'll need to coordinate the delivery and setup with your ceremony space, so put your wedding planner or best man in charge of this task.

28. Write down Your Digits

Carry an emergency contact sheet on your wedding day. Keep the paper with names and phone numbers of all your vendors in your purse -- it may come in handy in case your limo driver gets lost or you decide you'd like your photographer to take some behind-the-scenes shots.

29. Call the Fashion Police

Don't go dress shopping on your own -- all the gowns will start to look the same after a while and it will be harder to recall which style you really loved. But be careful about who you do bring. If your mom or sibling can't make the trip, ask a friend who is truly honest. This is the time when you really need to know which dress looks best.

30. Be Realistic With Your Time

When it comes down to the last month of your planning (and when you're particularly harried) look at your mile long to-do list and cut three things. Yes, cut three things. Not crucial things that you just don't feel like doing, such as picking a processional song or confirming final details with all of your vendors. Eliminate only the over-the-top tasks like hand-painting "Just Married" signs, or baking cookies for all of the welcome bags. Make a pledge to not think about them ever again.